

Gandhi's Conception of Ahimsā (non-violence) and Satyagraha (zest for truth)

(N.B. This material is a verbatim copy from various sources)

M.K. Gandhi revived Buddha's ethics of ahimsā, evolved a new outlook on life based on the doctrine of ahimsā and sought to solve all social, political and economic problems in the light of this principle. According to Gandhi, his contribution to all the problems lay in his presentation "for acceptance of Truth and Ahimsa in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations." Gandhi was influenced by Tolstoy who believed in absolute altruism. Tolstoy maintained that the true self could be realized in acts of self-sacrifice alone and that the moral goodness was identical with altruism. Gandhi borrowed the idea of civil disobedience from Henry Thoreau and pointed out: "He says, 'I accept the motto: 'That government is best which governs least.' I believe: 'That government is best which governs not at all.'"

According to Gandhi, Ahimsā is not merely a negative virtue of non-killing and non-injury, but a positive virtue of doing good to others. It is supreme kindness and supreme self-sacrifice leading not only to complete absence of ill-will towards mankind and sentient creation but also over-flowing love and affection for them. Gandhian ahimsā means complete abstinence from causing pain or injury through word, deed, or thought. As, according to Gandhi, God is Truth and Love, we can realize Truth by loving the whole animal world including mankind. "Ahimsa is the basis of the search for Truth... A perfect vision of Truth can only follow a realization of Ahimsa."

Gandhian ahimsā requires truthfulness and fearlessness. Thus, according to Gandhi: "There is only one whom we have to fear, that is God. When we fear God, we shall fear no man; and if you want to follow the vow of Truth, then fearlessness is absolutely necessary." This doctrine of fearless pursuit of truth is called *Satyagraha* (zest for truth). Life should be ruled by the law of Truth regardless of consequences. Gandhi says, "Ahimsa is the means; Truth is the end. Ahimsa is our supreme duty." "Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them." "Non-violence and Truth are inseparable and presuppose each other."

He says, "Non-violence implies as complete self-purification as is humanly possible." It implies "a living faith in the existence of the soul as apart from the body." Non-violence is *soul force*. It is power of *Atman*. It is power of Love. "It is uttermost selflessness. Selflessness means complete freedom from a regard for one's body." "Ahimsa does not simply mean non-killing." "Anger is the enemy of Ahimsa; and pride is a monster that swallows it up." Ahimsā implies conquest of anger and pride. "A Satyagrahi will always try to overcome evil by good, anger by love, untruth by truth, himsa by ahimsa." Ahimsā implies absence of hatred. Hate ought to be conquered by love. "We can win over the opponent only by love, never by hate." "In its positive form, Ahimsa means the largest love, greatest charity. If I am a follower of Ahimsa. I must love my enemy. Active Ahimsa necessarily includes truth and fearlessness. The practice of Ahimsa calls forth the greatest courage. Non-violence is the weapon of the strongest and bravest." It is the opposite of cowardice. It is not flight from the attack of the evil-doer. It is better to be violent than to be a coward. "My creed of non-violence is an extremely active force. It has no room for cowardice or even weakness." "A violent man can become non-violent. But a coward can never become non-violent. Non-violence implies restraint upon one's desire for vengeance. Vengeance is weakness. It springs from fear of harm. Vengeance is better than helpless submission. But forgiveness is higher than vengeance." He pointed out, "Ahimsa is the extreme limit of forgiveness. But forgiveness is a quality of the brave. Ahimsa is impossible without fearlessness." "Soul-force requires the control of all bodily and self-regarding desires. Thus non-violence implies truthfulness, selflessness, harmlessness, freedom from anger, pride, and hatred, love for all men and creatures, fearlessness, and courage, humility, forgiveness, and absolute self-surrender to God." Gandhi said, "Hate the sin and not the sinner." "For we are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of one and the same Creator, and as such the divine powers within us are infinite. To slight a single human being is to slight those divine powers, and thus to harm not only that being but with him the whole world." So we should not try to crush the wrong-doer but try to resist evil by dissociating ourselves from it in all possible ways. Evil cannot stand by itself. Non-co-operate with evil, and it will die of inanition. "It is quite proper to resist and, attack a system but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself." And we can effectively attack an evil system by non-co-operation with it in a non-violent manner. His moral weapon of non-violent, non-co-operation is a most potent weapon to fight an evil system with.

According to Gandhi, *Civil disobedience*, non-payment of taxes, etc., are the potent means of fighting foreign domination.

Non-violence is not flight from wickedness. It is not passive submission to the will of the evil-doer. It is "mental and moral opposition to immoralities." It is deliberate restraint upon desire of vengeance. Retaliation increases wickedness. Non-violence is an active moral fight against wickedness. It is not physical resistance to evil but moral resistance to it. According to Gandhi, "Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the evil of the evil-doer, but it means the putting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant." "The satyagrahi seeks to convert his opponent by sheer force of character and suffering. The purer he is and the more he suffers, the quicker the progress." "It is not non-violence if we merely love those that love us. It is non-violence only when we love those who hate us." Violence is the law of the jungle. Gandhi said, "Non-violence is the law of the human race, and is infinitely greater than and superior to brute force." Violence breeds violence. It springs from anger and ill-will. It destroys itself. Non-violence springs from love. Love kills violence. It ultimately disarms opposition. It does not crush the opponent by coercion. It wins him by conversion. It transforms him by superior moral strength. Gandhi says, "Non-violence is never a method of coercion; it is one of conversion." "The satyagrahi's object is to convert, not to coerce, the wrong-doer." All social, economic, political, religious evils are based on violence. They can be ended by non-violence. Non-violence is not only a moral weapon of an individual. It is a moral weapon of the masses; organized and well-disciplined mass non-violence is an infallible moral weapon against all kinds of evil, social, economic, religious, national or international. Non-violent non-co-operation "is an evolutionary revolution; it is a bloodless revolution. The movement is a revolution of thought, of spirit. Non-co-operation is a process of purification and, as such, it constitutes a revolution in one's ideas."

"Fasting unto death is an integral part of Satyagraha programme. Fast is the last weapon in the armoury of the votary of Ahimsā. Fasting quickens the spirit of prayer. Fasting is spiritual and, therefore, addressed to God."

Mahatma Gandhi wanted to evolve a new social order on the basis of love and self-sacrifice. He wanted to give opportunity to an individual to rise to the height of his personality. But he did not want to apply force to divest the privileged classes of their wealth like Marx. He did not believe in class war. He was not a socialist or a communist. He believed in change of heart and voluntary surrender of superfluous possessions for the benefit of the poor. There was no place for brute force and violence in his scheme of a new social order. Love and non-violence are the foundation of the social structure that he wanted to evolve. According to Gandhi, it is a slow but sure process. It avoids bloodshed, chaos and confusion. Love is unifying. Hatred is disintegrating. Love gives unity and harmony, a reign of peace and joy.

He says, "I suggest that we are thieves in a way. If I take anything that I do not need for my own immediate use and keep it, I thief it from somebody else. Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day; and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this world, there would be no man dying of starvation. I am no Socialist, and I do not want to dispossess those who have possessions; but I do say that, personally those of us who want to see light out of darkness have to follow this rule. I do not want to dispossess anybody; I should then be departing from the rule of Non-violence.....You and I have no right to anything that we really have until these many millions are clothed and fed. You and I, who ought to know better, must adjust our wants, and even undergo voluntary privation in order that they may be nursed, fed, and clothed." A Satyagrahi must take the vow of non-possession and voluntary poverty. Gandhi says, "A seeker after truth, a follower of the law of Love, cannot hold anything against tomorrow. God never stores for the morrow. If we repose faith in His Providence, we should rest assured that He will give us every day our daily bread." "Love and exclusive possession cannot go together. When there is perfect love there must be perfect non-possession."

Non-violence is a rule of conduct not only in individual life, but also in political, social and economic life. This is the greatest contribution of M.K.Gandhi to the world's culture and civilization. Violence may end an evil system but it tends to recoil upon its author. It demoralizes one who adopts it. Violence breeds violence. It brings about a chaos. It poisons the source of social life. Non-violence

purifies an evil system of its evils. It changes a human system from within by working a change in its soul, as it were. It can be applied to the social and economic spheres also. It takes the form of non-cooperation with the capitalistic system of industry, which is founded on a systematic exploitation of the poor, and promotion of cottage industries and the like. In the social sphere it takes the form of non-cooperation with the privileged classes who deny even elementary rights to some of their fellow-brethren. Gandhi did not believe in war, because it is mass slaughter of men, and because it is against the law of human nature i.e., against the rule of Truth and Non-violence.

According to Gandhi, "Exploitation is the essence of violence." The principle of non-violence necessitates complete abstention from exploitation in any form." "It is only when a man or a woman has done body labour for the sake of service that he or she has a right to live." "The divine law is that man must earn his bread by labouring with his won hands. He, who eats without offering sacrifice, eats stolen food. Sacrifice means *bread labour*." Every human being has a right to live and therefore to find the wherewithal to feed himself and to clothe and house himself." The rich cannot accumulate vast wealth without exploiting the poor. Exploitation involves violence. Equal distribution can be brought about through non-violence. Every person should reduce his wants to a minimum, exercise self-restraint in every sphere of life, and live a simple life.

The wealthy should not be dispossessed of their possessions, because that would imply resort to violence. They should act as *trustees* of their superfluous *wealth* and use it for the good of society. Gandhi advocated non-violent socialism. He did not believe in class war, which made use of violence and brute force. The rich should either be converted into "trustees" or be completely isolated.

Seeking what was best in his tradition, Gandhi repudiated the claims of human inequality by circumstances of birth that underlay the caste system. Declaring freedom from ancient caste laws marked Gandhi as a modern figure despite his notable adherence to ancient ascetic forms. Gandhi's uncompromising concern for the welfare of the people of India and his courage in the struggle for independence from Britain established him as a political leader. His devotion to Hindu ideals and the simple life he lived made him a spiritual leader. Hailed as a saint in his own time and acknowledged as one of the most influential thinkers of the modern age, Gandhi insisted that his way was open to any who would simply decide to follow it.

According to Gandhi:

"The principles of Satyagraha... constitute a gradual evolution.

"Satyagraha differs from Passive Resistance as the North Pole from the South. The latter has been conceived as a weapon of the weak and does not exclude the use of physical force or violence for the purpose of gaining one's end, whereas the former has been conceived as a weapon of the strongest and excludes the use of violence in any shape or form.

"The term *Satyagraha* was coined by me in South Africa to express the force that the Indians there used for full eight years and it was coined in order to distinguish it from the movement then going on in the United Kingdom and South Africa under the name of passive resistance.

"Its root meaning is holding on to truth, hence truth-force. I have also called it Love-force or Soul-force. In the application of Satyagraha I discovered in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy. For what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other. And patience means self-suffering. So the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self.

"But on the political field the struggle on behalf of the people mostly consists in opposing error in the shape of unjust laws. When you have failed to bring the error home to the law-giver by way of petitions and the like, the only remedy open to you, if you do not wish to submit to error, is to compel him by physical force to yield to you or by suffering in your own person by inviting the penalty for the breach of the law. Hence Satyagraha largely appears to the public as Civil Disobedience or Civil Resistance. It is civil in the sense that it is not criminal.

"The lawbreaker breaks the law surreptitiously and tries to avoid the penalty, not so the civil resister. He ever obeys the laws of the State to which he belongs, not out of fear of the sanctions but because he considers them to be good for the welfare of society. But there are some occasions, generally rare, when he considers certain laws to be so unjust as to render obedience to them a dishonour. He then

openly and civilly breaks them and quietly suffers the penalty for their breach. And in order to register his protest against the action of the law givers, it is open to him to withdraw his co-operation from the State by disobeying such other laws whose breach does not involve moral turpitude.

“In my opinion, the beauty and efficacy of Satyagraha are so great and the doctrine so simple that it can be preached even to children. It was preached by me to thousands of men, women and children commonly called indentured Indians with excellent results.

“Carried out to its utmost limit, Satyagraha is independent of pecuniary or other material assistance; certainly even in its elementary form, of physical force or violence. Indeed, violence is the negation of this great spiritual force, which can only be cultivated or wielded by those who will entirely eschew violence. It is a force that may be used by individuals as well as by communities. It may be used as well in political as in domestic affairs. Its universal applicability is a demonstration of its permanence and invincibility. It can be used alike by men, women and children. It is totally untrue to say that it is a force to be used only by the weak so long as they are not capable of meeting violence by violence. This superstition arises from the incompleteness of the English expression, passive resistance. It is impossible for those who consider themselves to be weak to apply this force. Only those who realize that there is something in man which is superior to the brute nature in him and that the latter always yields to it, can effectively be Satyagrahis. This force is to violence, and, therefore, to all tyranny, all injustice, what light is to darkness. In politics, its use is based upon the immutable maxim, that government of the people is possible only so long as they consent either consciously or unconsciously to be governed. We did not want to be governed by the Asiatic Act of 1907 of the Transvaal, and it had to go before this mighty force. Two courses were open to submit to the Act, or to suffer the penalties prescribed under the Act, and thus to draw out and exhibit the force of the soul within us for a period long enough to appeal to the sympathetic chord in the governors or the law-makers. We have taken long to achieve what we set about striving for. That was because our Satyagraha was not of the most complete type. All Satyagrahis do not understand the full value of the force, nor have we men who always from conviction refrain from violence. The use of this force requires the adoption of poverty, in the sense that we must be indifferent whether we have the wherewithal to feed or clothe ourselves. During the past struggle, all Satyagrahis, if any at all, were not prepared to go that length. Some again were only Satyagrahis so called. They came without any conviction, often with mixed motives, less often with impure motives. Some even, whilst engaged in the struggle, would gladly have resorted to violence but for most vigilant supervision. Thus it was that the struggle became prolonged; for the exercise, prolonged training of the individual soul is an absolute necessity, so that a perfect Satyagrahi has to be almost, if not entirely, a perfect man. We cannot all suddenly become such men, but if my proposition is correct—as I know it to be correct—the greater the spirit of Satyagraha in us, the better men will we become. Its use, therefore, is indisputable, and it is a force, which, if it became universal, would revolutionize social ideals and do away with despotisms and the ever-growing militarism. If the past struggle has produced even a few Indians who would dedicate themselves to the task of becoming Satyagrahis as nearly perfect as possible, they would not only have served themselves in the truest sense of the term, they would also have served humanity at large. Thus viewed, Satyagraha is a noblest and best education. It should come, not after the ordinary education in letters, of children, but it should precede it. It will not be denied, that a child, before it begins to write its alphabet and to gain worldly knowledge, should know what the soul is, what truth is, what love is, what powers are latent in the soul. It should be an essential of real education that a child should learn, that in the struggle of life, it can easily conquer hate by love, untruth by truth, violence by self-suffering.”

Bibliography

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